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Exploring Emotions on #auspol: Polarity, Conservatism and Public Performance in the Twitter Debate on Australian Politics

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Abstract

The affective communication patterns of conversations on Twitter can provide insights into the culture of online communities. In this paper we apply a combined quantitative and qualitative approach to investigate the structural make-up and emotional content of tweeting activity around the hashtag #auspol (for Australian politics) in order to highlight the polarity and conservatism that characterise this highly active community of politically engaged individuals. We document the centralised structure of this particular community, which is based around a deeply committed core of contributors. Through in-depth content analysis of the tweets of participants to the online debate we explore the communicative tone, patterns of engagement and thematic drivers that shape the affective character of the community and their effect on its cohesiveness. In this way we provide a comprehensive account of the complex techno-social, linguistic and cultural factors involved in conversations that are shaped in the Twittersphere.

Keywords

Twitter; hashtag; political debate; communicative structure; emotion;

Introduction: Exploring the emotional culture of the #auspol community

Real-time social media spaces such as Twitter have opened up new possibilities for people to participate in communicative action and public debate, uninhibited by spatio-temporal restrictions. Whether such technologies have a meaningful effect on public debate, or simply provide additional channels for the “usual suspects” to express their views, remains the subject of debate; however, we can clearly note that they provide new channels for public communication (Bruns & Stieglitz, 2013). Recent research has explored how people talk about political issues (Bruns & Burgess, 2011; Christensen, 2011; Harlow & Harp, 2012; Larsson & Moe, 2011; Lotan *et al.*, 2011; Small, 2011; Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2012), crisis situations (Bruns *et al.*, 2012; Hughes & Palen, 2009; Mendoza *et al.*, 2010; Palen *et al.*, 2010), shared experiences such as television shows (Deller, 2011), conferences (Dröge *et al.*, 2011; Weller *et al.*, 2011), and everyday exchanges (boyd *et al.*, 2009; Papacharissi, 2011; Marwick & boyd, 2011) as well as how Twitter is used in brand communication (Krüger *et al.*, 2012; Stieglitz & Krüger, 2011). While these studies offer extensive insights into broader patterns of communication and participation in online debate, more focussed explorations of the particular affective dimensions of online discussions (Dang-Xuan & Stieglitz, 2012) can provide insights into their impact on the culture and dynamics of online communities.

In this paper, we examine the communicative structure of conversations taking place in the Twitter hashtag community #auspol (on Australian politics) – a highly active, often heated space. We first provide a quantitative assessment of the structure of the community, in order to demonstrate that there is an established community of contributors to the hashtag discussion, before undertaking a qualitative analysis of the content of the #auspol discussion to explore how feelings like discontent, aggression and provocation, as well as positivity and togetherness, feature in the debate and shape the communicative behaviour of its participants and the overall atmosphere of the community. To do so, we conduct a detailed manual and semi-automated textual analysis of tweet contents, and explore the use of ‘heat maps’ that track, identify and visualise data, such as the distribution of sentiment in

Twitter conversations, as an innovative tool for research in this area (see Ahn *et al.*, 2012; Mislove *et al.*, 2010a, 2010b for applications of this method). This combined qualitative and quantitative analysis provides insights into the cultural, linguistic and technological aspects of online communication.

Methodology

Quantitative and quantitative analysis of the #auspol community

The hashtag is a technological affordance that shapes and is shaped by the communicative action of people on Twitter. It is used as the standard tool through which conversations around a particular topic are coordinated, enabling online publics to form (Bruns & Burgess, 2011), as well as as a linguistic marker for the expression of emotions such as approval (#win, #ftw) or disapproval (#facepalm, #headdesk; Bruns & Stieglitz, 2013). #auspol is a long-standing institution in the Australian Twittersphere, having operated at high volume for several years to date, that supports the communion of a stable public of participants in political debate. The discursive use of additional hashtags to denote particular sentiments also features within the #auspol debate and represents a useful indicator for exploring the emotional charge and communicative behaviour of the #auspol conversation.

Our quantitative analysis of #auspol interactions to date, using the methods and metrics outlined in Bruns & Stieglitz (2012; 2013), has found that the participants gathered around the #auspol hashtag constitute a highly discursive community of users who actively engage in tweeting and responding to one another. Figure 1 shows that between February and December 2011, the most active 1% of the total #auspol contributor base accounted for almost two thirds of the over 850,000 tweets posted to #auspol; together, the top 10% of contributors posted over 90% of all #auspol tweets. This points to the existence of a highly committed core of contributors, and the formation of strongly centralised community structures. Further, the fact that nearly half of all tweets by the lead users in #auspol were @replies (rather than retweets or unprompted original statements) signals the substantial levels of interaction amongst this community. In essence, this small group of highly engaged political enthusiasts can be said to perform their political debates in front of the wider community of Twitter users.

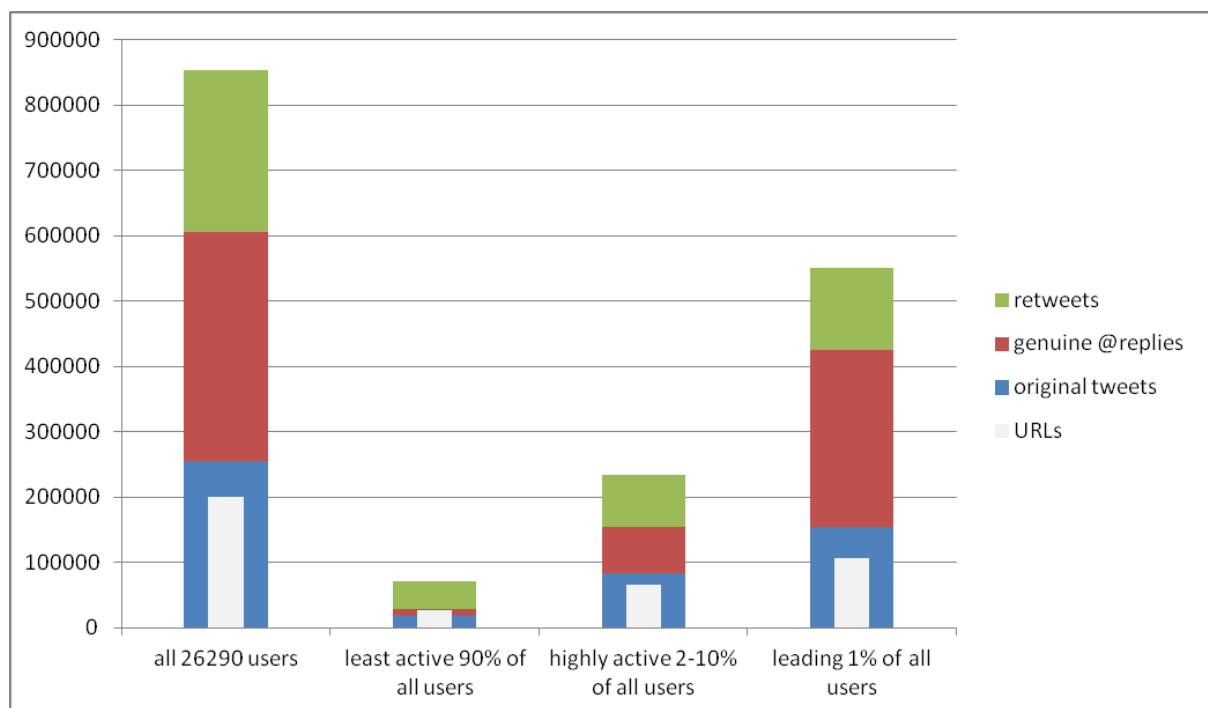


Figure 1: Activity of different user percentiles in #auspol, Feb.-Dec. 2011

As such, the #auspol community provides an exemplary case study for analysing the linguistic traits, communication behaviours, and social networking structures of an active online community. Huffaker (2010, 595) suggests that ‘the message content that users contribute not only includes the subject of the individual messages but also the emotional valence associated with a message, or the way in which it is framed’. In this paper, we complement our quantitative insights into the #auspol debate with qualitative analysis of the content of tweets to explore how emotions are expressed and performed in the context of publicly visible online debates in order to explore the following questions:

- What are the key themes of political debate in #auspol, and what is the communicative tone with which they are addressed?
- How do lead users in #auspol perform their community leadership in engaging with other users?
- What drives intense communicative interaction between leading #auspol participants (agreement, antipathy, or rational political discussion)?
- Are there established tropes of discussion which support and maintain a sense of community even across political divides?

Conclusion: #auspol as a case study of the role of affect in public debate in the Twittersphere

The #auspol community is an interesting case in point to explore the affective nature of tweeted communication, due to the highly discursive and polarised nature of this particular political discussion. In-depth content analysis of the communicative behaviour of Twitter users who discuss contentious political issues in the #auspol debate, in combination with our quantitative evaluation of the structure of the #auspol community, offers a comprehensive insight into the complex socio-technical context within which hastagged conversations are shaped. Using #auspol as one particular example of how feelings feature in online conversations allows broader inferences about how publics engage in debate in the Twittersphere. Innovative ways of researching and displaying data, such as the use of ‘heatmaps’, contribute to an enhanced understanding of the culture of online communities.

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